

476 Cardinal Circle
Torrington, CT 06790
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To the Honorable Members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee:

Two years ago I was contacted by a woman who worked for the state. Her young son was murdered several years ago. She had started to be able to live with her grief, but there was a burden she hadn't anticipated: she had to listen to her boss bring it up nearly every day in conversation. The employee told her boss it was painful to her, but the boss continues to raise it in conversation with others so that the woman can hear it. It is psychological torture.

I am writing in support of Raised HB 6188 An Act Concerning State Employees and Violence and Bullying in the Workplace. As the Connecticut volunteer coordinator for the Workplace Bullying Institute and the founder of Connecticut Healthy Workplace Advocates, I have been privy to the stories of many people who have suffered from workplace bullying. The majority of people who contact me or who have joined CHWA are either government workers (federal, state, municipal) or professionals employed in the health care industry. I am pleased to see a bill that recognizes workplace bullying as an unremedied problem in our society. HB 6188 seeks to study the problem and create a necessary reporting mechanism.

Workplace bullying is a widespread problem that, as recent WBI studies have shown, adversely affects nearly half of all workers, either as targets or witnesses. Approximately 37% of workers are bullied during their careers. And when targets report bullying to Human Resources or to their superiors, in ¾ of all cases, the employer does nothing, or makes the situation worse by not recognizing the type of problem it is.

Workplace bullying is similar to domestic violence, except that it happens at work. The abuser keeps the target off guard and frightened. It is also akin to sexual harassment, in that targets feel embarrassed and often question why it is happening to them. They worry it is their fault.

Workplace bullying consists mostly but not solely of psychological abuse, such as sabotaging the work of the target; belittling the target's work, personal hygiene, personal habits, and so on; and intimidating the target with threats of discipline. Bullying is committed by both men and women against both men and women. To date, the concept of a hostile work environment applies only in discrimination cases in which a party is a member of a protected class. Workplace bullying is not based on status. Targets are not chosen because of their race, gender or other factors, but for less obvious though equally pernicious reasons.

I have learned from targets things that are done in the workplace that defy reason and civility. Going to work ought to be simply about doing one's job. One modest, middle-aged woman who is soft-spoken, dedicated, and friendly has had objects thrown at her, had her bathroom breaks monitored, and has had her professionalism repeatedly questioned in front of other employees and students. Discussing the bullying is so painful to her she can only do it in whispers. Until the bully boss came in, she had loved her job. She still loves her work, but dreads seeing the boss and feels sick each morning. She has started taking sick days and personal days, which she had not previously done. This is not the most egregious example; it is a typical one. In other cases employees have been screamed at, had their work plagiarized, been excessively disciplined, and been denied leave so that the building stress could not be alleviated with a break.

These are all situations that have happened in government jobs in Connecticut.

My best friend committed suicide after being bullied at work by a new boss who made her life "utterly unbearable." She was a federal employee with thirteen years of impeccable service who was watching her career be destroyed by a man under orders to get rid of her. When she realized she could not stay in the job, she asked for a transfer and a letter of recommendation. Despite the fact that the boss wanted her to quit, he refused to give her either. It was not enough to make her quit; he wanted her ruined.

There is no rationale for this. Targets of bullying, especially those who have endured it for years, are labeled as whiners; as they get depressed or anxious, they are labeled as mentally unstable. No one asks whether the bosses are in fact the unstable ones. Cruelty on the job is not reasonable. It does not enhance productivity. It does not serve a legitimate business purpose. As economic pressures force workers to stay in jobs, bullies will have targets right where they want them. We need HB 6188 to ensure that workers have a culture that fosters productivity.

HB 6188 is a first step toward gathering data on the problem. Connecticut should pass HB 6188 so that it will lead the United States in creating a workplace culture free of hostility, harassment, and abuse.

Resolutions Passed by Various Organizations:

In New York, three unions have either issued, or pledged to issue, resolutions to address workplace bullying in support of the HWB and NYHWA: The New York State University Teachers, the Professional Staff Congress, and the Civil Service Employees Union (CSEA). CSEA is already educating its union stewards to recognize bullying and is negotiating contracts to include a workplace bullying protections. The Business and Professional Women of New York State also issued a resolution.

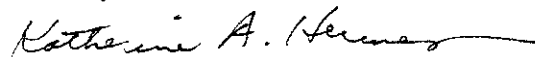
CSU-AAUP: Passed a resolution April 17, 2008 to support a Healthy Workplace Bill.

NAACP: "Resolved: That NAACP units at all levels will seek legislation at all appropriate levels to deem workplace bullying illegal."²

The City of San Francisco adopted a resolution against workplace bullying that states in part that it "condemns this abusive workplace behavior."³

HB 6188 is a major step forward for our state. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Katherine A. Hermes, J.D., Ph.D.
Connecticut Healthy Workplace Advocates

¹ "The Story of Our Workplace Advocacy," California Healthy Workplace Advocates. <http://www.bullyfreeworkplace.org/id29.html>, and New York Healthy Workplace Advocates. <http://www.nyhwa.org>, (accessed Dec. 10, 2008).

² 2008 NAACP Annual Convention. <http://www.naacp.org/assets/form/resolutions.pdf> (accessed Dec. 10, 2008).

³ City of San Francisco City Council, Jan. 24, 2007. <http://www.bullyfreeworkplace.org/id18.html> (accessed Dec. 10, 2008).